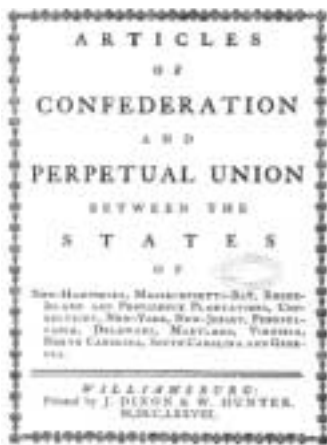


The Articles of Confederation

WHEN THE MOVEMENT for American independence flamed into war, so did the movement for a national government to unite the states in the struggle against Britain and to keep them united and free in peacetime. The form of such a government, however, was the source of much controversy. Some Patriots feared that a strong national government with power over the individual states would be as bad as British rule. Others felt the new nation was simply too large and diverse to be ruled by a central government. After many drafts and much debate, the Continental Congress adopted the Articles of Confederation in 1777 and sent the document to the state legislatures for approval. The lifetime of the Articles was short:

arguments over several states' land claims held up approval until 1781, and government under the Articles lasted just over seven years. Although the Articles gave the national government—Congress—substantial powers, it was difficult for Congress to raise money, and in many ways the individual states still functioned more like sovereign nations rather than as parts of a national whole. By the late 1780s, many leading Americans wanted a more effective system to deal with domestic and international problems. In summer 1787 delegates met in Philadelphia to hammer out the framework of a new form of national government—the U.S. Constitution.



Title page of the Articles of Confederation as printed in Williamsburg in 1778

The Articles of Confederation: Key Points

- Gave Congress the following powers, most of which were retained when the Constitution took effect:
 - set foreign policy and maintain diplomatic relations with other countries
 - make treaties
 - maintain an army and navy and declare war
 - establish a national currency
 - run a postal service
 - manage relations with the Native American nations
- Called on Congress to function as the “court of last resort” in disputes between states; under the Constitution, the judicial branch of the federal government (the Supreme Court) has this power.
- Established a unicameral (one-house) Congress, with one vote for each state and delegates elected by the state legislatures. The Constitution set up a bicameral (two-house) legislature, with a House of Representatives elected by the voters of each state in proportion to population and a Senate in which each state had two votes, with senators elected by state legislatures. (In 1913 the 17th Amendment to the Constitution established direct election of senators by the voters of each state.)
- Did not give the national government the power to raise taxes directly or to regulate trade between the states.
- Confirmed each state as “sovereign and independent” but made it illegal to restrict the movement of people between states and called for each state to accept the legal decisions of other states. Also guaranteed the people of every state—except slaves—the “privileges and immunities of free citizens.”
- Could be amended (changed) only by agreement of all 13 states. Amendments to the Constitution must be ratified by three-fourths of the states.

Timeline

- 1775 July** Benjamin Franklin submits the first draft of the articles to the Continental Congress. It is not adopted.
- 1775** Silas Deane of Connecticut submits his own draft, but as with Franklin’s, Congress takes no action to adopt it.
- 1776** Delegates and committees prepare several more drafts. None is considered satisfactory by Congress.
- 1776 June** Congress begins debating articles based on a draft submitted by John Dickinson of Pennsylvania.
- 1777 November** Congress votes to accept Articles of Confederation based loosely on Dickinson’s draft; the Articles are sent to the individual states for approval.
- 1777–1779** Legislatures in all states except Maryland approve the Articles.
- 1781 January** Virginia gives up its western land claims, removing Maryland’s main objection to the Articles.
- 1781 March 1** Maryland finally approves the Articles of Confederation, which take effect as the first national constitution of the United States.
- 1788 July** The U.S. Constitution is ratified and replaces the Articles of Confederation as the supreme law of the land.